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Ball Gym overtaken by robots

Six teams practice 'Lunacy' contest for Purdue tourney

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Robots took over the basketball court in Ball Gym on Sunday for the second annual Robot Scrimmage.

Six high school robotics teams from across the state met at Ball State University to test and debug their robots before a For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology regional competition in March.

The scrimmage, held by Muncie's Robotics Team 1720, brought about 50 high school students together for a practice game before they have to send their robots to the Boilermaker Regional at Purdue University.

Team coordinator Cheryl LeBlanc said FIRST's game this year is called Lunacy in honor of the 40 year anniversary of NASA landing a man on the moon. Groups received identical starting kits with the materials needed to build their robots. Teams had six weeks to design and build a robot that could collect balls, functioning as moon rocks, and put them into trailers attached to the opposing team's robot. The game is played on a low-friction floor, simulating physics on the moon, she said.

Students in FIRST work in real life work situations and develop skills that appeal to colleges and employers across the country, LeBlanc said. Students work in teams with a deadline to manage a budget, market their group and produce a functional, remote-controlled robot.

"This is exactly what it's like in real life," she said.

Chris Elston, president of Indiana FIRST, said the national program was founded in 1989 and is devoted to developing problem solving skills in high school students and training them to be leaders in science, technology and engineering fields. It puts professionals from these fields into the groups to help the students develop professional skills, he said.

Seth Cook, a member of team 1720, said FIRST helped prepare him for college and boosted his résumé.

"It's almost like a real-life experience out in a job," he said. "When colleges see FIRST robotics on a transcript they see they've worked in real-life situations."

Cook said working with the professional mentors has given him a chance to strengthen his problem solving, building and marketing skills.

He said he and his team were looking forward to the regional competition and comparing his team's robot to others.